

FEEDING WILD DOLPHINS

How does feeding wild dolphins contribute to their depredatory (stealing) behavior?

Feeding wild dolphins causes them to associate humans with food and become habituated to humans, which has been observed to result in dolphins “begging” for handouts. If fed repeatedly, dolphins learn where to go for free handouts. Bait and catch attached to a fishing line is a readily available food source for dolphins, especially for habituated dolphins. Additionally, tossing leftover bait or unwanted fish into the water when a dolphin is nearby may reinforce dolphins’ associating humans with food, thereby encouraging stealing behavior.

When did NOAA Fisheries Service become aware that feeding wild dolphins was a problem?

NOAA Fisheries Service initially identified wild dolphin feeding was a problem when “feed-the-dolphin” cruises emerged in early 1988. Feeding wild dolphins became prohibited under a 1991 regulation enacted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), which a federal appeals court upheld in 1993. For more information about the MMPA, visit www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/laws/mmpa.